Where dogs, ghosts and lions roam: learning from mobile ethnographies on the journey from school

Gina Porter*, Kate Hampshire*, Albert Abane**, Alister Munthali***, Elsbeth Robson*** , Mac Mashiri**** and Goodhope Maponya ****

(* Durham University, UK; ** University of Cape Coast, Ghana, *** University of Malawi, **** CSIR, South Africa)

Where dogs, ghosts and lions roam: learning from mobile ethnographies on the journey from school

Abstract
This paper draws on mobility research conducted with children in three countries: Ghana, Malawi and South Africa. It has two interlinked aims: to highlight the potential that mobile interviews can offer in research with young people, especially in research contexts where the main focus is on mobility and its impacts, and to contribute empirical evidence regarding the significance of everyday mobility to young people's lives and future life chances in sub-Saharan Africa. During the pilot phase of our research project on children, transport and mobility, the authors undertook walks home from school with teenage children[1] in four different research sites: three remote rural, one peri-urban. As the children walked (usually over a distance of around five kilometres) their stories of home, of school and of the environment in-between, gradually unfolded. The lived experiences narrated during these journeys offer considerable insights into the daily lives, fears and hopes of the young people concerned, and present a range of issues for further research as our study extends into its main phase.

Introduction

This paper utilises mobile narratives as a route to understanding young people's experiences of place and environment and the way these impact on their daily life[2]. Our focus is on and around a narrow corridor extending between school and home, drawing on studies we conducted in Malawi, Ghana and South Africa. We use these studies to show how walking *with* young people can bring significant insights into their daily lives, fears and hopes and how the narratives which unfold are intimately bound up with and shaped by their daily lived experience of the environments around and along their travel routes. Our aim is to show how mobile interviews can enhance research with young people, and the particular advantages a mobile interview confers where the study focus is on mobility and its role in shaping young people's lives in the everyday i.e. where mobility is central to the unfolding narrative. In the context of growing interest in mobilities across the social sciences (Sheller and Urry 2006, Cresswell 2006), including specific consideration of walking practices (Lee and

[1] We use the terms children and 'young people' interchangeably in this paper. When we asked young people aged c. 12-18 years from the three countries at our Malawi inception workshop about terminology, they expressed no concern about the use of the term 'child' for people in their teens.
[2] A first draft of this paper was presented at a workshop at the Centre of West African Studies, University of Birmingham, May 2007.

Ingold 2006, Ingold and Vergunst 2008), such mobile methods have considerable potential. The mobile interview contributes to the compendium of mobile methods such as participant observation, transect walks, neighbourhood walks, videod journeys and journeys using mobile phones linked to GPS receivers, which are being employed by researchers, including with children, albeit principally in Western contexts (e.g. Morrow 2001, Walker et al. 2009; but see Langevang 2007 for use of participant observation with young people in a Ghanaian city).

The empirical material produced in the course of our mobile interviews is described in some detail, to illustrate the way the method illuminates our understanding of children's experiences on the everyday school journey. The material presented also contributes to the small but expanding literature charting the diversity of children and young people's everyday physical mobility and immobility in the continent, which includes early work by Katz (1986, 1993), in rural Sudan, but is now often focused on urban or suburban environments (e.g. Langevang 2007, Gough 2008, Benwell 2009, Langevang and Gough 2009). Additionally, it extends debates about factors affecting educational access in sub-Saharan Africa (Ersado 2005, Lewin and Sayed 2005, Huisman and Smits 2009).

The material we utilise in the paper is drawn from the pilot phase of an ongoing research project on children, transport and mobility[3]. This larger study (in three countries, two agro-ecological zones per country, four sites – urban, peri-urban, rural and remote rural – per zone) has a focus not only on access to education, but also on access to health care and to other services that are important to children's lives. It aims to build a strong evidence base which will substantially improve policy makers' awareness of the crucial significance of mobility for young people across Africa: there is remarkably little knowledge of their current mobility patterns and even less about their transport and mobility needs (Porter and Abane 2008). Mobile ethnographies[4] form a significant component in the larger study, which incorporates both adult and child researcher strands. Here we report only on our first experimental walks conducted during the pilot phase of the adult research strand. While our focus within the research project as a whole is not on children's environmental knowledge *per se*, we would argue that children's interactions with their local environment, which we examine in the course of this paper, are crucial to their lived experiences at home, at school, on their journeys between the two, and in the shaping of their life chances and aspirations for the future.

Improvement in children's (and especially girls') access to education in sub-Saharan Africa is a key Millennium Development Goal and has prompted substantial research over the last decade. Issues such as fees and other payments to schools, the opportunity costs of time spent at school and educational quality are often raised, but relatively little attention has been paid to the time, effort and/or costs of transport incurred in getting to school. However, significant points have been made by Avotri et al. (1999) who observed how long walks to school due to lack of or high cost of transport and attendant problems of lateness encouraged late 'over-age' enrolment

[3] Details of this ESRC/DFID-funded project are available at www.dur.ac.uk/child.mobility/

[4] We use the term 'mobile ethnography' in this paper as specific acknowledgment of the physical mobility of the subjects involved in making and recording the narrative, and the centrality of mobility to that narrative, as opposed to the type of multi-site ethnography which is more extensive across geographical space and specifically embodied in the world system (Marcus 1995).

(especially of girls), truancy and early drop out in Ghana, and by the 2003 National Household Travel Survey in South Africa which found 76% of 'learners' walking to their educational destination and almost 3 million out of the 16 million total (especially those located in more rural provinces) spending more than an hour a day walking to and from educational institutions (RSA Department of Transport 2003). In Africa's rural areas, schools cannot be provided in every settlement and secondary schools, in particular, are likely to be located at a distance: long walks to and from school are inevitable, even in locations where regular transport is available, given the widespread lack of funds to pay children's fares.

Accompanying children on long walks from school in Ghana, Malawi and South Africa, allowed us to share their mobility experiences, if only for an afternoon. It opened a window for us into their everyday lives and daily routines (Holloway and Valentine 2000:11-15 , Katz 2004, Horton and Kraftl 2006). The mundane mobilities of the everyday, reflected in the individual narratives we report below, incorporate substantial dynamic and embodied encounters with place. These include occasional dislocating rhythms and disruptions which can be frightening, even life-threatening, but must be addressed and woven back into the mundane (Binnie et al. 2007). They also indicate the extent to which subjective, gendered experiences of the everyday journey to and from school in Africa not only have significance in themselves, but can affect ability and willingness to learn, act as impediments to regular educational access and ultimately shape future lives. There are fascinating comparisons to be made with children's experiences of school and other journeys in Western environments, where parental and other protections have been established to guard children from the threat of disorder (Katz 2004, Hillman 2006), but there is insufficient space to consider them in this paper.

Following a review of methodology we describe each of the four walks we undertook in the pilot and then explore the children's narratives which unfolded as they walked. This allows us to reflect on how the lived experience of the journey on foot between school and home, and the subjective experience of the environment this entails, impacts on young people's lives and life chances.

Methodology

Our discussion is based on studies conducted with teenagers in four different locations: one each in Ghana and Malawi, two in South Africa. Three of the sites in which the accompanied walks took place could be classified as relatively remote rural, one (in South Africa) as transitional between peri-urban and rural. In the study locations we generally walked with three or four young people for the accompanied walks, usually both girls and boys: in all except the peri-urban location they were at the upper end of primary/Junior Secondary School. In each country the authors were working with a team of local researchers, and it was in most cases one or more of the authors[5] plus three or four adult research assistants (RAs) (seven in Ghana, where the research team was larger) who participated in the school to home walks. These walks formed only one component of the pilot research programme with adult researchers since we were experimenting with a number of different methods, including life

[5] The project lead researcher, Gina Porter, participated in all the walks discussed in the paper. Some of the in-country collaborators were unable to participate in their country pilot walk but are included as authors because they helped to organise the walk concerned.

histories with people in their mid-20s, and individual stationary and group interviews with children of various ages in mixed and single-gender groups.

The common format in the mobile interview was for each RA to walk with one child (preferably of the same gender): normally the pairs walked at a similar pace, and kept other pairs in sight. The authors walked with different pairs at various times and held brief review discussions along the route at a few key points. Conversations were conducted in the child's own first language but RAs made rough (verbatim) notes, as they walked, or at each of a number of short stops, then wrote up their notes and impressions in English shortly afterwards. RAs were asked to discard the checklists they had been using in stationary interviews and instead to encourage the child with whom they were walking into a more spontaneous conversation about the walk, using prompts such as any change in the child's pace, an obstacle or any notable features, to encourage the child to comment where necessary. If conversation tailed off we suggested they could raise such topics as their destination (the child's home and home life), experience at the point from which they had travelled (the school in this case), other times the child had travelled this route, any notable things which had happened on this journey at other times, and their own compared to other children's experiences along the route. Four accompanied walks made with a total of 18 children are reported in this paper. The names of all the children involved have been changed to preserve anonymity.

The young people in each case were recruited from pupils at a school in a settlement where we had already started a pilot programme of research with children, their parents, teachers and community leaders. We decided to explore the potential of this mode of working partially because initial research with children in these study locations in which our (university based) RAs attempted to conduct stationery interviews with young people raised common problems: the children often were shy and intimidated by the inequalities of the perceived power relationship, resulting in awkward silences (Hill 2006). In some cases parents (from whom permission to interview children had been requested) hovered, usually adding to the interview tension, or answered on behalf of the child. We introduced the school-to-home walks partly as a way of circumventing these problems, partly as a way of ourselves experiencing and understanding some of the difficulties faced by children who live at a distance from school.

We found this approach highly effective, both in terms of eliciting information and in terms of improved understanding. Even very shy young girls were able to open up after some minutes. They no longer needed to make (or avoid) eye contact with the interviewer because they were walking side-by-side, and neither they nor the accompanying RA had to worry about uncomfortable silences because the nature of the terrain and/or the exertion of walking made silence a natural component of the interchange. We observed that a formal question and answer format was usually easily abandoned by both interviewer and by interviewee in favour of informal conversation and unsolicited observation from the interviewee. Such interchange not only enabled the RAs to contextualise the teenagers' lives beyond the walk itself, but also enabled the teenagers to ask questions about the lives of their urban visitors. Parents (although still approached in advance to give permission) were at home or at work at the time of day when the walk home from school took place and none objected, perhaps because of the group nature of the exercise, the fact that school

head-teachers had also approved the exercise, and because walking to and from school is perceived as a normal everyday activity, whereas being interviewed is not.

The selection of children for this component of the pilot was made according to their place of residence. We asked staff at the schools which were participating in our research about the more distant settlements they served and then asked the head-teacher to identify a small set of pupils, all from the same distant settlement or neighbouring settlements. We then agreed a day on which pupils could be accompanied home after school finished. Parental permissions were obtained through the school. The walks generally commenced about 2 p.m., covered a distance of around five kilometres and took between about 100 and 120 minutes (i.e. with stops: probably 60 minutes without stops, though children usually estimated they normally took about 120 minutes or more to complete their journeys).

The piloting of the accompanied walks has provided valuable lessons regarding their use in the main phase of the project. RAs found it difficult to write detailed notes during the walks, and consequently we have emphasised the importance of making quick jottings en route but then writing up full notes of conversation and observation immediately after the walk. Arguably, tape recording of the walk could provide a more complete record, but transcription time would be substantial and there could be a temptation for the RA to record his/her own observations as the walk progressed, rather than simply noting down such observations, thus subtly changing the nature of the interchange with their young respondent. We have encouraged the RAs to continue with the pattern of the pilot walks in the main phase of work, i.e. avoiding a semi-structured interview format but rather using experiences on each individual walk to direct the conversation where necessary, while ensuring that key facts such as age, family/household background and relevant experiences regarding the facility to which they are walking, are obtained before the end of the walk, if they have not arisen naturally within the conversational exchange.

Logistical and ethical issues which have arisen in the wider project are discussed elsewhere (Porter et al. in press; Robson et al. in press). One of the main difficulties we have found in organising walks is the gender composition of research teams. In all countries it has been hard to recruit women RAs (in part because of the requirement to work in remote areas) and young men in their 20s and 30s comprise the majority in every adult research team, yet convention deems it unsuitable for girls to walk alone with young men, especially beyond the confines of the village. Consequently RAs try to ensure the accompanied walks they undertake with girls, where possible, include a number of walking pairs and that one female RA is present among the group. Such walks inevitably tend to take time to organise given the importance of obtaining necessary permissions from both the young people themselves and their parents or carers.

The walks from school

1. Malawi

In Malawi our accompanied walk took place at the start of the rainy season in Zomba district in the Shire Highlands region, along a narrow but direct footpath linking the

primary school at Busi[6] c. 12 kms from the paved road) to the remoter village of Solero. This settlement is located approximately four kilometres away across five streams (and c. six kilometres by a more circuitous rough but motorable road). Three schoolgirls from the village, all in the upper level of primary school and in their early to mid-teens (the eldest 16 years) were accompanied by three RAs (two young men, one young woman) during the walk. The pupils normally walk together to and from school: there are no other children from their village who attend school on a daily basis from home, because of the distance.

The route passes through cultivated land (mainly growing maize), isolated homesteads, and areas of bush in which two graveyards are located. There are three locally constructed wooden bridges to cross in this dissected landscape: one was only constructed in the past year; before that a number of deaths from drowning had occurred. Two other streams are unbridged. In the wet season the route is potentially quite dangerous: a slippery path, gullies, steep slopes and streams in full spate. If the rains are very heavy the girls sometimes wait to see if the water in the streams will subside. If not, they may then have to take a more circuitous route. When the fields are being cultivated they must walk in the gullies between the crops rather than on the ridges or they will be chased by farmers.

2. Ghana

By comparison with the Malawi accompanied walk, the five kilometre walk which we undertook with children in the Ghana pilot was relatively easy: there were no streams to cross and the route mostly follows a narrow unpaved road, in parts surrounded by tall grasses. This walk took place in Central Region, in an off-road area of undulating land west of Nyankumasi, in the transition zone between coastal savanna and rain forest where cocoa farming is an important economic activity. The walk was made in the dry season from the primary school at Fosu to two cocoa producing hamlets which have no services. In this case seven adult researchers were involved in the walk, accompanying seven children who live in neighbouring hamlets: three girls aged between 11 and 14, four boys aged between 14 and 18 years.

The route is hilly but easily traversed because an unpaved road is available for much of the journey. Approximately four kilometres of the road is easily motorable; the last kilometre to the further hamlet is usually motorable, albeit with difficulty. However, few vehicles use the route, except on two local weekly market days, when minibuses based in nearby towns drive in to take local farmers and traders to market. The road passes through bush areas, including one in which a graveyard is located. There are occasional patches of cultivated field and considerable areas planted with cocoa: settlement is sparse with only a few scattered homesteads.

3. South Africa

In South Africa we undertook two separate pilot studies, one in each of our selected agro-ecological zones, because of the need to train separate research teams in each area (for logistical and linguistic reasons). The first pilot took place in Eastern Cape, with a Xhosa-speaking team, the second in North West region, with a Tswana- and

[6] Names of smaller rural settlements and all children's names have been changed in order to give anonymity to the schools and children concerned.

Sotho-speaking team. Both took place towards the end of the rainy season, i.e. at the end of the summer.

The accompanied walk in Eastern Cape was conducted in the upland Pondoland region of Port St Johns Local Municipality (Ward 10), from the Junior Secondary School (JSS) in the off-road village of Sapiwe (about 5km to the nearest paved road) to Lomati, a remote upland village with no road access, approximately four kilometres distant and located at the other side of a substantial hill, standing approximately 120 metres above the surrounding land. The journey was made along a narrow path, mostly through grass and scrubland, occasionally crossing steep scree slopes and small streams. The research team of four researchers (two young men, two young women) accompanied three girls aged 15, 17 and 19 years and a young man of 22 years (who is still attending JSS).

The accompanied walk with school children in North West region was conducted from a secondary school in Winterveld, a large, dispersed settlement, about 50 kms north-west of Pretoria in the Tshwane metropolitan area. By contrast with the other settlements in our pilot, Winterveld is best described as mixed peri-urban. It is located within the area occupied before 1994 by the homeland of Bophuthatswana. The majority of inhabitants are either unemployed and living on social grants or work in the distant industrial centre at Rosslyn, near Pretoria. Routes were followed to students' homes in another dispersed more rural settlement, Kromkuil, about 4-5 kms distant across the plain: the route starts in an area of dispersed buildings and small garden plots, but then a series of narrow paths cross about 3 kms of largely uncultivated scrubland with trees, including some relatively deep (approximately 8-10 feet) depressions, before passing over a paved road to reach more dispersed settlement at Kromkuil. In this case our team of four researchers (three young men, one young woman) walked with two girls of 17 and 20 and two boys of 17 years.

Environment and lived experience on the walk from school: children's narratives

Observation during the walks from school and the children's narratives which unfolded as we walked indicate the range of activities which commonly take place in all three countries:

- The physical act of walking
- Dealing with physical hazards along the walk associated with the environment traversed (crossing streams, climbing slopes, sliding down banks, negotiating gullies and steep, slippery footpaths)
- Dealing with other hazards –material and otherwise- encountered along the way (threatening dogs, abusive calls, threatening farmers, potential rapists, witches, bandits, ghosts, snakes, wild animals – real or imagined- such as foxes, hyenas, leopards, lions)
- Play (fights, football etc.) and courtship
- Carrying loads (school books, farm produce, sand, groceries, other items)
- Collection of wild fruits/ plants in season for refreshment on the journey or for consumption at another time (e.g. mangoes and other wild fruits in Malawi, guavas in Eastern Cape)
- Drinking water from the streams because of thirst during the journey.
- Brushing down clothes and cleaning up shoes (if worn on the journey) before final entry into the school grounds.

The precise nature of these activities is shaped by the environmental context, by the cultural and socio-economic context, by gender and, to some extent, by age. Such activities may, in turn, help shape the lives and life chances of the children concerned, an issue we discuss in greater depth in the following section.

Basic physical ability to walk a long distance to school helps shape school enrolment patterns in all the remote villages where our child research participants are resident. Children are not enrolled at school until they are physically able to make the journey to and from school each day: this delays the age at which children start school, especially when the child has no older siblings or children resident nearby with whom they can travel. In the case of the Eastern Cape village (where our JSS respondents were already in their late teens and early twenties), most children do not start school until they are about eight years old, or even later, because of the distance and the challenging nature of the route along which their journey takes place. Stephen, the 22-year old boy we accompanied told us he did not start school until he was 12 because of the distance and he still finds the daily journey daunting: "*when I think about school my heart becomes bitter for the distance I travel to school is very long for me. At times I think about dropping out of school like other children in my location who have stopped going to school because of the long distance*". A girl from the same village reported that only two people in the community had passed standard 10. She observed, *"I like school but my journey discourages me"*. Similarly, one of our Malawian respondents talked of her boy cousin who stopped school at 14 years, in standard 5, because he felt the distance to primary school was simply too far to travel daily. Even along the relatively easy route to school in our Ghana example, a group of male parents in the remote village concerned emphasised how strongly ability to walk the distance affects school enrolment. However, Effie, the youngest of the children we interviewed from this village, didn't see distance as an issue: "*I do not have a problem with walking since it has become part of me*". She is learning to ride a bicycle (using part of her breakfast money occasionally to hire a cycle to practice) but will soon leave the school to attend another in a nearby town, where she will live with relatives.

School attendance of children living in remoter locations is often affected by environmental conditions along the route. Crossing rapidly rising rivers in the rainy season can be particularly dangerous, as our Malawian, Eastern Cape and North West (Kromkuil) respondents all observed, often pointing to particularly difficult areas and obstacles as we walked. In such cases it is necessary at times to take a circuitous route which adds not only additional distance but also additional time to the journey. In both Malawi and Eastern Cape the girls recounted days when they had to simply turn back because the rivers were so high. Such problems did not arise in the Ghanaian pilot area but are a significant issue in other parts of that country (Avotri et al. 1999). Learning how to respond to disruptions of this and other kinds (Binnie et al 2009) is a competency which children gradually build up over time, but the presence of such intermittent and sometimes unpredictable hazards also helps to explain why parents in remote areas are often reluctant to send younger children to school.

In every region where we walked there were pupils who complained about problems of getting their shoes and uniform dirty, especially in the rains when it is easy to slip and fall, but also in the dry season when there may be clouds of dust from unpaved

paths. In many cases the school children carry their shoes in order not to get them dirty before they reach school. A dirty uniform or shoes can result in punishment at school or being barred from school for *'not being neat'*. Children may have to sit all day in wet clothes, having finally arrived at school. "*The mud on the way makes us dirty and we wash our feet at the last river before we reach the school: we have to put off our shoes if it is raining. Our teachers understand our route, they do not punish us much - they give us two lashes, but we sometimes miss morning classes"*. (19 year old girl, grade 9, Eastern Cape). Such corporal punishment is widespread in schools across all our study countries, whether officially banned or not, and is a very common consequence of late arrival in class (even if lateness is due to good reasons such as a difficult journey or heavy home duties). In Ghana the children had been made to carry sand to school (for constructing a school building), as a punishment for unpunctuality.

Physical hazards along the route are only one component of the school access story, however, especially so far as girls and younger children are concerned. When the crops and grass are well grown, fear of encounters with dangerous bandits and other material or spirit beings which may be hidden by the vegetation is often particularly strong. The areas around graveyards present a particular hazard, not only for the spirits which children fear they may encounter there, but also because the land around is often untended and covered by dense vegetation, and because of their location away from habitation. In a stationary interview it is possible that this issue would have been forgotten, but as we passed graveyards in both our Malawi and Ghana walks, the children's pace increased and prompted comment. In Malawi, Melina observed with a shudder, "*There are many rumours of visitations: I have heard people hide in the graveyard and try to get children's bags, notebooks and suchlike*"
This observation was supported by Elly, the youngest of the Malawian girls on this journey:
"*there are so many problems [here]. You meet a very long person and I suspect it's a witch, and there are dogs that chase us and fierce animals – lions and hyenas- and they bit us. Three children were once bitten – one by a lion and she died, and two boys were bitten by hyenas, but they are still alive*"[7].
The third Malawian girl in our walking party confirmed the problem of dogs[8] around the graveyard and talked about a "madman" who once chased her. Later, beyond the graveyard, when we stopped for a brief chat and for the RAs to make some notes, all the children reported having seen a mysterious fire at the graveyard, and ascribed this to witchcraft.

In Ghana 11–year old Effie also worried about the cemetery she passes along her route to and from school. Again it was the actual process of walking past the graveyard that prompted her to comment. Ghosts live here, she observed, so she is keen to ensure she walks with her elder brother, especially in the morning. Unfortunately, he is usually ready to leave home before her (because he has fewer household tasks to perform): if he does not wait for her she runs along this section. The other girls on this route were particularly concerned about an area of long grass where the road is very narrow since they have heard stories of people being beheaded

[7] In Malawi, as in much of sub-Saharan Africa, fear of spirits and belief in witches is widespread among children and adults. Hyenas are associated with witchcraft.
[8] Regarding dogs as a source of fear among mobile children see also Benwell (2009) on suburban Cape Town.

there. They were more sanguine about other potential dangers – snakes are seen sometimes, for instance, but they are said to be mostly harmless.

In our Ghana pilot walk rape *per se* was not raised as a specific danger, in contrast to the pilots in both Malawi and South Africa where fear of rape was strongly expressed by the girls we interviewed. In Malawi, Eva, aged 16 reported that she had only recently been chased by five older boys (apparently intent on rape): again this observation was prompted by our walking past the specific point at which this experience had occurred. When we interviewed parents and teachers in surrounding villages, they very frequently raised the issue of rape and teenage pregnancy: we were told that most girls in this Shire Highlands area do not finish school because they get pregnant. Susan, a 17 year old secondary school pupil, in South Africa's North West Province, had heard of many cases of rape along the route she travels to and from school and, as we walked, pointed out the depressions and wooded areas where men (including groups who meet there to smoke dagga) may wait to attack passers by,:
"*I fear people who hide in the bush [waiting] for us. They wait for us in the bush and as we walk, especially when you are alone, they grab your school bag with all the belongings that you have with you…. The bush is bad, you cannot see people hiding or seeking you. ... I love sports but I cannot be left behind [at school] because I will arrive very late at home. It is even worse to cross the bush at night. There are so many rapists there at night and a lot of drunk people".*
Susan's fears are by no means unrealistic: the day after our walk we learned that a girl from the same school had been raped on the way to school. Young boys have also been raped. In the case of our Eastern Cape route, actual rape cases are rarer, though stories still abound and were recalled by a number of children independently to individual RAs as they walked, generally as they were passing through the most heavily wooded area.

The stresses of the basic daily walk are compounded by work demands in rural environments, in particular (i.e. all the case study areas except Winterveld/Kromkuil). In all the rural areas where we walked children must collect water (often multiple trips) and undertake a range of other domestic chores prior to the journey to school. They also have to work in the fields. In the Ghanaian study area, children play a key role in cocoa head porterage, especially in the rainy season when the local road access is poor. In all three remote rural sites girl children, in particular, told us how they must rise at dawn or earlier to undertake their chores before setting out for school. In Malawi, Melina, who is fostered by her aunt, was particularly concerned about being late for school as a result of the quantity of household chores she has to complete before leaving home each morning. (Such chores commonly seem to be heaviest among fostered girls in all three countries, an issue we will explore in the main phase of our study.) If she is late, Melina told us, she is sometimes forgiven and allowed to join the lesson in progress but at other times she is simply sent directly home as punishment, despite the fact that, in her case, this entails a long, lonely and potentially hazardous walk. If she is very late, she sometimes feels it is preferable to play truant that day.

By contrast with the girls, most boys reported a less onerous set of tasks that had to be completed on weekdays before school (though they are often occupied with tasks such as farming, herding, collecting groceries or other work at the weekend). This accords with literature on child work in African contexts which suggests that once boys reach

their mid teens their contribution to domestic work, particularly carrying water and firewood, is much reduced (Andvig 2001): consequently they are likely to start their journeys to school in time and less exhausted. The boys we accompanied tended to complain more about the distance than girls traversing the same routes but still found time to play with friends (football and fights) along the way. Like the girls, they are keen to avoid being late because of the fear of being lashed or other punishments (such as sweeping or cutting grass around the school compound), but they more commonly report being delayed by games than by household tasks which must be accomplished before they leave home.

Many of the children with whom we walked – girls and boys – express and display great determination: some have ambitions far beyond what they can hope to achieve in the context of the limited schooling available to them, and yet undertaking the journey itself seems to be a daily affirmation of their will to succeed. Succeeding, unsurprisingly, is conventionally expressed in terms of being elsewhere, in a more accessible (urban) world, with the resources to travel at will: being a doctor, a nurse or a lawyer. Nonetheless, it is remarkable that so many children are prepared to make long and tiring journeys of the type we describe, in sometimes hazardous conditions, often after arduous work at home and possibly on an empty stomach, to reach a facility which, especially in the case of primary schools, is usually inadequate in so many respects: poor infrastructure (overcrowded classrooms, few lavatories, leaking roofs, no windows), little equipment, and under-staffed in some cases by inadequately trained teachers who are often absent and regularly inflict corporal or other punishments with impunity.

Environment and lived experience on the school journey: reflecting on implications for future livelihood and life chances

By contrast with school children's very limited independent mobility in Western contexts today, the mobility of the children we accompanied on their journeys from school in sub-Saharan Africa may seem remarkable[9]. All the children with whom we made the accompanied walks travel daily, year in and year out, to and from school over a distance of about five kilometres. They walk on their own or in small groups; very rarely with adults, a fact which they find unsurprising: parents and carers are reportedly too busy to accompany them.

In some respects their travel history might, superficially, appear remarkably positive. Their level of physical activity is substantially higher than that of Western children, among whom risk of obesity is a growing concern. There are also seeming advantages in terms of their interaction with the physical environment and the potential this offers for children's cognitive development (Bjorklid 2004, Wells 2000). Other arguments might be made around contact with nature and the potential this gives for development of environmental awareness and knowledge (Katz 1986, Hart 1997) and (perhaps especially in the case of trees or running water) for mental well-being (e.g. Korpela et al 2002, Milligan and Bingley 2007).

However, as the Western literature emphasises, children's environmental experiences are also complicated by societal and individual factors (e.g. Gesler 1992, 1993).

[9] In other parts of Europe, notably Scandinavia , children are more independently mobile than in UK, but even here there has been some decline (Bjorklid 2004).

There is little literature available on this theme in rural African contexts[10], but from our own observations in this and earlier research, the benefits of regular daily travel on foot are usually little appreciated by those who must undertake such journeys, despite the natural beauty of many of the landscapes traversed. The woodlands and tree-studded lush grasslands through which we passed on our accompanied walks, for instance, might be viewed as highly beneficial to mental well-being in some Western contexts (Bell 1999), but are often a source of children's (and parents') fear. Woodlands are places where potentially malevolent spirits dwell and wild animals and bandits roam, areas which must be passed through at speed (as is also sometimes the case in Western perceptions too, see Milligan and Bingley 2007). Streams and rivers were perceived by our respondents as offering an opportunity for refreshment during a long walk, but after heavy rains are a potential death trap in regions with few good bridges (especially since few rural children away from major water sources learn how to swim: there are usually no swimming lessons and no safe swimming pools within which to learn).

Moreover, these long journeys through potentially hazardous environments add to the other factors which may constrain and curtail a child's educational opportunities, ultimately tipping the balance between the decision to attend or to abandon school, and thereby affect their future livelihood opportunities and life chances. As we saw in the case of Stephen in Malawi, some parents living in areas remote from school simply do not enrol their children in school at all, or do not enrol them until they are relatively old, because of the distance and potential dangers along the route they must traverse. Disabled children are unlikely to attend school at all, in such conditions. If/when children are finally enrolled, as our narratives above amply illustrate, they commonly face a wide range of daily hazards. Although children also occasionally reported pleasures along the journey to school – picking fruits, running down hills, even courtship and sexual adventures in the case of a few boys (especially during the dry season) – all the narratives put greater emphasis on the more negative aspects of the journeys.

We have mostly described children's journeys to first stage schools: primary/JSS (only the Winterveld/Kromkuil study was with secondary school pupils). Once children graduate to secondary school travel difficulties are usually compounded for children in rural areas, since schools are fewer in number and more commonly located in major service centres. In some cases the children will board at school, or move to live with relatives in town (as in the Ghanaian case mentioned above): they may even move into rented accommodation close to the school. However, the barriers to secondary education are often unsurmountable, especially for girls: the distances to be covered daily are too great, the costs of relocation (including loss of domestic labour at home) unaffordable.

[10] Though see Katz's work in a rural village in Sudan (1986, 1991, 1993, 2004) which emphasises young boys' and pre-pubescent girls' substantial spatial range and Matthews' 1995 study within a Kenyan roadside village. Matthews' case study emphasises parental control on children's movements, and finds 'the environmental range of Kanyakine children was much more strictly sanctioned than for comparable age groups in Britain' (p. 288): this was possible because of the specific context, in that a school and other facilities were available within the village. We will examine variations in children's environmental experiences and impact of parental sanctions on movement in a wide range of different contexts in our larger study.

Not surprisingly, many girls in particular find even regular primary school attendance difficult and thus withdraw from school at a very early stage in their school career. The decision will be made in the context of a complex of factors such as (parental and/or child) fear of rape, the long journey, exhaustion (and associated lack of concentration and poor results at school) after a long walk following domestic chores, punishments at school following late arrival, the family's need of help at home, costs of uniform, books and other school-related charges (even where there are no formal fees) etc. In some cases pregnancy and/or early marriage speeds the decision (though we were told girls occasionally return to school after the baby is born). However (as our mobile narratives suggest), the access factor is likely to form a significant component of the decision to withdraw, a hypothesis we are exploring through both qualitative and survey research across 24 research sites in the main phase of our study.

The impact of limited education must not be underestimated. In the case of girls it is likely to shape not only the current generation's access to work opportunities, but also the life chances of the next generation through influence on fertility rates, child-rearing practices and related factors. The relationship between female education and reduced fertility is now well established (e.g. Ainsworth et al 1995; Martin and Juarez 1995, Scribner1995, Dreze and Murthi 2001). Recent work suggests a threshold effect, such that the effect of the first few years of schooling on fertility is less predictable, but thereafter the relationship is virtually universal and is one of the clearest determinants of fertility decline (Diamond, Newby and Varle 1999). Thus, girls who have to curtail their education at an early stage because of access difficulties are more likely to go on to have large families. The relationship between maternal education and childcare practices, child health and mortality is even better established (Levine et al. 1991, Hobcraft 1993, Joshi 1994, Kabeer 2005, Boyle et al. 2006[11]). Better educated mothers tend to respond better to public health messages (e.g. about nutrition and hygiene) and they are more likely to seek and receive appropriate healthcare for their children than their less educated counterparts, resulting in improved child survival. There is also a clear inter-generational effect in terms of schooling: better educated mothers are more likely to send their own children (and girls in particular) to school, thus perpetuating child health and survival benefits into future generations.

Conclusion

Walking produces a shared rhythm of movement (Lee and Ingold 2006) which encourages conversation, companionability and the sharing of understandings. Through our mobile interviews we learned a great deal about the everyday lives of the children whom we accompanied – and they in turn felt sufficiently at ease to ask questions of us. The school-to-home journeys we accompanied and that are reported in this study are among the lengthier ones experienced in each school from which our interviewees were recruited: we specifically selected pupils with a relatively long journey home for the pilot, in order to give the RAs time to practice the skills they would need in working with this method, but the stories the young people relate have wide-scale resonance across sub-Saharan Africa (Avotri et al 1999, Porter 2002, RSA

[11] Boyle et al., using DHS surveys across 42 developing countries, note a particularly strong association between child health and maternal education (though particularly at upper levels of education) in Ghana.

Department of Transport 2003). These are tales of the everyday, not the exceptional (Benwell 2009).

Nonetheless, the accompanied walks we made in our pilot studies are clearly not generalisable: the narratives which unfolded are about particular young people in particular places. Indeed, it was the interaction between person and place that proved to be critical in our analysis. As Dixon and Durrheim (2000:27) point out, places are not "fixed, empty and undialectical backgrounds to […] social action. [Instead] Places are dynamic arenas that are both socially constituted and constitutive of the social." Mobility represents a key element in this interaction between people and place: "social relations ….. are not enacted *in situ* but are paced out along the ground" (Ingold and Vergunst 2008:1). The dynamic and dialectical nature of space and travel are strongly evident in the children's mobile narratives presented and analysed here.

Firstly, as we saw, different children passing through the same spaces interpret and react to those spaces differently. In particular, gender and, to a lesser extent, age influence the ways in which the young people experience and respond to their journeys to school. Girls are more likely than boys to be afraid of unpleasant and potentially dangerous encounters with other people along the way, from possible rapists to people shouting abuse and telling them they should be at home helping their mothers. Girls also experience more problems of having to hurry and missing opportunities to walk with others (thus losing potential social and safety benefits), owing to their greater involvement with domestic tasks before school. Younger children typically find the journey more physically difficult and, in many cases, more dangerous, than older ones, who can more easily climb over tree roots and ford streams. Moreover, younger children are most likely to be afraid of "imagined" dangers, such as lions, witches and ghosts.

Secondly, it is the *subjective* experience of environment that shape children's access to schools and life chances. Some of the hazards discussed by children are clearly very real, such as the danger of rape in Winterveld/Kromkuil and the risks of injury and tiredness because of the difficult terrain traversed. Other dangers exist more in the minds of the children than in reality. Examples include fears of drowning or rape in areas where no such instances had actually every occurred, or fears of supernatural hazards. However, such imagined dangers are just as real for the children as the more "objective" dangers, and can have just as strong an effect on their behaviour. Thus, one young boy, with the agreement of his parents, had changed school because of fears that many children at his former school were being bewitched. His new school was much further away and entailed a difficult journey over very rough terrain. The physical difficulties of the journey, combined with his age, meant that he often found it too difficult to get to school and his attendance had become more sporadic.

Our experience with mobile interviews in the pilots suggests the method has considerable advantages in research with young people and is certainly worthy of consideration for inclusion among a compendium of methods. The young interviewee can avoid unwelcome eye contact with a relative stranger, yet the shared rhythm of walking encourages companionability and the development of rapport. The embarrassment of uncomfortable silences is avoided: spaces in conversation are natural, shaped perhaps by a change in speed, or the necessity of exertion. The walk also avoids unwanted interventions from parents and others adults who may not only

listen in during stationary interviews but sometimes try to answer for the child (a problem we have encountered in stationary interviews with young people at home). Moreover, the walk has particular value where research is focused on mobilities: the shared experience of the journeys helps us to penetrate and explore the realities of children's mobile worlds where stationary description is difficult. In the pilots they have allowed us to traverse environments rarely encountered by adult researchers in their urban-based lives and to physically appreciate the lived experience of a daily five kilometre walk to and from school. They have given children the space to offer their own interpretations of their journeys, expressing feelings and fears on their own terms, since some of the difficult power relations often inherent in adult-to-child research are eased by the process of walking together.

We would suggest that the walking conversation, whether as part of a purposive journey along a defined route, or even merely a perambulation, has much to offer in many research contexts, but perhaps especially where establishing rapport with interviewees is complicated by strongly skewed power relations. Our RAs, who are mostly urban-based university postgraduates from relatively privileged backgrounds, reported that, for them, the walks were a revelation: they now appreciated the implications when a child reported walking five or more kilometres to school and another five kilometres home every day, especially when the majority of these children were also substantially involved in water collection, other domestic duties and sometimes agricultural labour before and after school and in some cases left home each morning without having eaten. Sensitive issues such as fear, risk, hunger, work loads and ill-treatment which emerged in walking conversations away from the home environment, within the context of a companionable exchange, might well not have been adequately addressed in the conventional stationary interview. Additionally, the walk has proved to be a useful mnemonic device in conversations around mobility, offering reminders of significant obstacles, fears, pleasures and other elements affecting the experience of travel. In an African context the walking interview has the specific advantage of enabling lengthy, in-depth conversations with children and young people who are often time poor and whose labour contributions may be vital to household sustenance: the interview can be conducted even as they go about their work, without holding up tasks which the child is required to accomplish (such as travelling to the grinding mill, collecting water etc.). As we moved into our main phase of research the walking method and the insights we have gained from it have thus helped us to build a more robust and realistic framework of understanding.

Acknowledgments
This study was made possible by the following people: the children who agreed to participate in this study, the schools which helped with arrangements (including gaining parental consents) and the following RAs and researchers who walked with individual children: *Ghana:* Samuel Agblorti, Esia Donko, Regina Obli-Odei, Mercy Otsin, Samuel Owusu, Augustine Tanle, Ekaw Afful Wellington; *Malawi*: Linny Kachama, Matthews Nkosi, Bernie Zakeyo; *South Africa, Eastern Cape*: Andisiwe Bango, Sipho Dube, Nokholo Hlezupondo, Busi Luwaca, Noma Mlomo; *South Africa, Gauteng/North West region:* Dumisane Buthelezi, Lucas Marole, Marinkie Molwelang, Goodhope Mponya. We are most grateful for their assistance. We have also benefited from the comments of two anonymous referees. The study is funded by ESRC/DFID (RES-167-25-0028): however, the funders can accept no responsibility for any information provided or views expressed.

References

Ainsworth, M., Beegle K, and Nyamete, A., 1995. The impact of female schooling on fertility and contraceptive use: a study of 14 sub-Saharan countries. World Bank: Washington DC. LSMS working paper no. 110.

Andvig, J.C., 2001. Family-controlled child labour in sub-Saharan Africa. A survey of research. Washington: World Bank, Social Protection Unit, October 2001.

AU/UNECA Africa Union and UN Economic Commission for Africa, 2005. Transport and the Millennium Development Goals in Africa. Working document prepared by the Africa Union and UN Economic Commission for Africa, in collaboration with ADB, World Bank and the EU, February 2005.

Avotri, R, , Owusu-Darko, L., Eghan, H. and Ocansey, S., 1999. Gender and primary schooling in Ghana. Sussex: Institute of Development Studies, October 1999.

Bell, M., 1999. Rehabilitating middle England: integrating ecology, aesthetics and ethics. In Williams A. ed. Therapeutic landscapes: the dynamics between place and wellness. University Press of America, MD, 15-27.

Benwell, M.C., 2009. Challenging minority world privilege: children's outdoor mobilities in post-apartheid South Africa. *Mobilities* 4 (1), 77-101.

Binnie, J, Edensor, T., Holloway, J., Millington, S. and Young, C., 2007. Editorial: mundane mobilities, banal travel. *Social and Cultural Geography* 8 (2), 165-174.

Bjorklid, P., 2004. Children's independent mobility and relationship with open space- studies of 12-year olds' outdoor environment in different residential areas. *Revisita Psihologie Aplicata Anul* 5 (3-4), 52-61.

Boyle, M.H., Racine, Y., Georgiades, K., Snelling, D., Hong, S., Omariba, W., Hurley, P. and Rao-Melacini, P., 2006. The influence of economic development level, household wealth and maternal education on child health in the developing world. *Social Science and Medicine* 63, 2242-2254.

Cresswell, T., 2006. On the move: mobility in the modern Western world. New York: Routledge.

Cresswell, T. and Uteng, T.P., 2008. Gendered mobilities: towards an holistic understanding. In Uteng TP and T Cresswell Gendered mobilities, chapter 1. Ashgate.

Diamond I., Newby, M. and Varle, S., 1999. Female education and fertility: examining the links. In C. Bledsoe *et al*. *Critical Perspectives on Schooling and Fertility in the Developing World*. Washington DC: National Research Council, 23-48.

Dixon, J. and Durrheim, K., 2000. Displacing place-identity: a discursive approach to locating self and other. *British Journal of Social Psychology* 39(1), 27-44.

Drèze J. and Murthi, M., 2001. Fertility, education, and development: evidence from India. *Population and Development Review* 27(1), 33-64

Ersado, L., 2005. Child labor and schooling decisions in urban and rural areas. *World Development* 33 (3), 455-480.

Fotel, T. and Thomsen, T.U., 2004. The surveillance of children's mobility. *Surveillance and Society* 1 (14), 535-554.

Gesler, W., 1992. Therapeutic landscapes: medical issues in light of the new cultural geography. *Social science and medicine* 34 (7), 735-746.

Gesler, W., 1993. Therapeutic landscapes: theory and a case study of Epidaurus, Greece. Environment and Planning D, *Society and Space* (11), 171-189.

Gough, K., 2008. 'Moving around': the social and spatial mobility of youth in Lusaka. *Geografiska Annaler* 90 (3), 243-255.

Hart, R.A., 1997. Children's participation: the theory and practice of involving young citizens in community development and environmental care. London: Earthscan.

Hill, M., 2006. Children's voices on ways of having a voice: children's and young people's perspectives on methods used in research and consultation. *Childhood* 13 (1), 69-89.

Hobcraft J., 1993. Women's education, child welfare and child survival: a review of the evidence. *Health Transition Review* 3(2), 159-175

Holloway, S. and Valentine, G., eds, 2000. *Children's geographies: playing, living, learning*. Chapter 1. Abingdon: Routledge.

Horton, J. and Kraftl, P., 2006. What else? Some more ways of thinking and doing 'Children's Geographies'. *Children's Geographies* 4 (1), 69-95.

Huisman, J. and Smits, J., 2009. Effects of household- and district-level factors on primary school enrolment in 30 developing countries. *World Development* 37 (1), 179-193.

Ingold, T. and Vergunst, J.L., 2008. Introduction In (eds) Ways of walking: ethnography and practice on foot. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Joshi A.R., 1994. Maternal schooling and child health: preliminary analysis of the intervening mechanisms in rural Nepal. *Health Transition Review* 4, (1)..

Kabeer, N., 2005. Gender equality and women's empowerment: a critical analysis of the third Millennium Development Goal. *Gender and Development* 13 (1), 13-24.

Katz, C., 1986. Children and the environment: work, play and learning in rural Sudan. *Children's Environments Quarterly* 3 (4), 43-51.

Katz, C., 1991. Sow what you know: the struggle for social reproduction in rural Sudan. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 81 (3), 488-514.

Katz, C., 1993. Growing girls/closing circles: limits on the spaces of knowing in rural Sudan and US cities. In Kinnaird, V, and Monk J. (eds) *Geographies of women over the life course.* London: Routledge.

Katz, C., 2004. Growing up global: economic restructuring and children's everyday lives. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

Korpela, K., Kytta, M., Hartig T., 2002. Children's favourite places: restorative experience, self-regulation and children's play preferences. *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 22, 387-98.

Langevang, T., 2007. Movements in time and space: using multiple methods in research with young people in Accra, Ghana. *Children's Geographies* 5 (3), 267-282.

Langevang, T., 2008. 'We are managing!' Uncertain routes to respectable adulthoods in Accra, Ghana. *Geografiska Annaler Series B Human Geography* 90 (3), 227-242.

Langevang, T. and Gough, K., 2009. Surviving through movement: the mobility of urban youth in Ghana. *Social and Cultural Geography 10(7), 741-756*

Lee J. and Ingold T., 2006. Fieldwork on foot: perceiving, routing, socializing. In Coleman, S. and Collins, P. (eds) Locating the field: space, place and context in Anthropology. ASA Monograph. Oxford: Berg.

Levine R.A. *et al.,* 1991. Women's schooling and childcare in the demographic transition: a Mexican case study. *Population and Development Review* 17(3), 459-496

Marcus, G.E., 1995. Ethnography in/of the world system: the emergence of multi-sited ethnography. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24, 95-117.

Martin T.C. and Juarez, F., 1995. The impact of women's education on fertility in Latin America: searching for explanations. *International Family Planning Perspectives* 21, 2:

Matthews, H., 1995. Culture, environmental experience and environmental awareness: making sense of young Kenyan children's views of place. *The Geographical Journal* 161, 285-295.

Milligan, C. and Bingley A., 2007. Restorative places or scary spaces? The impact of woodland on the mental well-being of young adults. *Health and Place* 13 (4), 799-811.

Morrow, V., 2001. Using qualitative methods to elicit young people's perspectives on their environments: some ideas for community health initiatives *Health Education Research,* 16 (3), 255-268.

Porter, G., 2002. Living in a walking world: rural mobility and social equity issues in sub-Saharan Africa. *World Development* 30 (2), 285-300.

Porter, G., Hampshire, K., Bourdillon, M., Robson, E., Munthali, A., Abane, A. and Mashiri, M. (in press) Children as research collaborators: issues and reflections from a mobility study in sub-Saharan Africa. *American Journal of Community Psychology*

Porter G. and Abane, A., 2008. Increasing children's participation in transport planning: reflections on methodology in a child-centred research project. *Children's Geographies* 6 (2), 151-167.

Robson, E., Porter, G, Hampshire, K. and Bourdillon, M. (in press) 'Doing it right?': working with young researchers in Malawi to investigate children, transport and mobility. *Children's Geographies* **7(**4).

Scribner, S., 1995. Policies affecting fertility and contraceptive use: an assessment of 12 sub-Saharan countries. World Bank: Washington DC. World Bank DiscussionPaper 259. Sheller, M. and Urry, J., 2006. The new mobilities paradigm. *Environment and Planning A*, 38, 207-226.

Walker, M.., Whyatt, D., Pooley, C., Davies, G., Coulton, P. and Bamford, W., 2009. Talk, technologies and teenagers: understanding the school journey using a mixed-methods approach. *Children's Geographies* 7 (2), 107-122.

Wells, N.M., 2000. At home with nature: effects of 'greenness' on children's cognitive functioning. *Environment and Behaviour* 32 (6), 775-795.